

Sliding into information abyss

Publication: Chicago Sun-Times (IL)

Date: July 16, 2007

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Section: Financial

Edition: Final

Page: 52

Word Count: 710

Column: Tech Matters

You don't have to be smarter than a fifth-grader to understand that the vast majority of commercial media is sensationalized rubbish. Perhaps this is why the idea of user-generated media -- where individuals compete with corporations for our attention -- is so compelling. Yet this idealism to date has mostly generated the slippery authority of Wikipedia and tackiness of MySpace.

To Silicon Valley-based author Andrew Keen, this media movement, commonly referred to as Web 2.0, has unleashed an "explosion of worthless culture, self expression and digital narcissism" that, unchecked, could bring "catastrophe" to Western Civilization. Keen was in Chicago last week to promote his new book, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet Is Killing Our Culture and Assaulting Our Economy* (Doubleday, 240 pages, \$22.95) to an audience of Internet, media and marketing professionals. The program was hosted by BIGFrontier Communications Group and Mobium Creative Group.

"The fact is, most of us don't have anything to say which is sufficiently provocative to generate a monetary transaction," said Keen, who also publishes a blog and a decade ago founded a Web company that ultimately failed.

"The very essence of a democratic society lies in a complex meritocracy," he said. It is no secret that mass media institutions such as newspapers and broadcast stations are losing their audiences to a decentralized Web of micro-media entities found mainly on the Internet. Books such as last year's *The Long Tail*, which Keen describes as "dreadful," famously document the market's shift from mainstream to niche-oriented commerce. If this trend continues, Keen argues, media professionals who for generations have provided us with news and entertainment will be replaced by less established amateurs.

To Keen, everyone loses in this process because "when we do away with common readership, we do away with common citizenship."

While he concedes that there is no turning back, conditions can be improved through education (understand that Wikipedia is not always accurate) and civility (honor intellectual property rights online).

He cited the Web site for the Guardian newspaper in England and services such as eMusic and Joost as new media entities that adhere to these principals while remaining commercially successful.

ROMANTICIZING OLD MEDIA

While Keen's fear of succumbing to a world of amateur publishers is noteworthy, it was media professionals who introduced our society to ambulance-chasing local news broadcasts and the canned laugh track. There's a lot about so-called traditional media that can be improved. Technology, while not a savior in itself, can make news stories more thorough, and entertainment programs more compelling. Quality does not necessarily diminish as our choices become more distributed.

The challenge for those who wish to make a living producing media is to thoughtfully integrate emerging technologies with generations-old methods of story telling. Since the age of cave painting, human beings have excelled in innovating efficient ways to communicate with one another. We now have more tools than ever before. Companies such as Google and Facebook have demonstrated there is room in the market for both amateurs and professionals to use these tools to create what has never previously existed.

There is no turning back. Why would we ever want to?
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